

A STUDY OF WOMEN CHARACTERS IN JHUMPA

LAHIRI’S NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

Jhumpa Lahiri is one of the most eminent Indo- American writers. She is one among the diasporic writers, carries with her the strikingly fresh Indian sensibility abroad and lets it out through her fiction in an impressive form. Since she herself is the child of immigration and multiculturalism, she could portray the characters both in the light of native and alien culture. Deeply felt by the importance of family relationship and attachment with the relatives in the home country, Jhumpa Lahiri has experienced the trauma of failing to find her identity in the new land where she could never have a sense of belonging. Though these displaced realities and self-imposed exile are in many ways a calamity, this existence acts as a stimulus and enables Jhumpa Lahiri to excel in fiction writing. As a popular young writer of Indian background, she is a sort of representative figure for the female predicament in Diaspora. She explores the ideas of cultural and personal isolations and identities.

Keywords: Culture, Diasporic, Feminist Approach, Harmony, Identity, Patriarchal, Social

The Namesake (2003): It is Lahiri’s much anticipated first novel. Like her short stories the novel too received huge critical attention, and was selected as one of the best books of the year by USA Today and Entertainment Weekly. Besides, it was a New York Times notable book, a Los Angeles Times Book Prize Finalist. Eventually the novel was also adapted into a film by Mira Nair bearing the same name. The film, starring both Bollywood and Hollywood artists, was released in March 2007. This novel describes the cultural dilemmas and displacement of Indian people. In their attempt to settle in a foreign land, the immigrant face many challenges, the main difficulties for them to reconcile the native cultural practices with the foreign cultural practices, upbringing of their children and make oneself compatible according to global requirements.

The next year, (2008) Lahiri came up with her second collection of stories, *Unaccustomed Earth*. Upon its publication, it came on The New York Times Best Seller List at the number one slot and bagged prestigious *Frank O’ Connor Short Story Award* for 2008.

The Lowland, published in 2013, was shortlisted novel for the *Man Booker Prize* and was in the final list of the National Book Award for Fiction. It is slightly different from the previous publications. It talks much about immigrant issues, withstands the whirlwind of political chaos and family ties.

Lahiri writes in American English with Indian flavour. The American literary world celebrates her as an American author. She has been appointed by the US President, Barack Obama, as a member of the President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities.

Jhumpa Lahiri in her works, *Interpreter of Maladies*, *The Namesake*, *Unaccustomed Earth* and *The Lowland*, travels through her antagonized experiences of an Indian woman across the world. She finds out the complex cultural encounter and shifts along with emotional imbalance and relationship between parents and children, lovers, siblings,

husband and wife and determination of identity in general. As a Diaspora writer, she deals with a multicultural society both from *inside and outside* seeking to find her native identity as well as the new identity in the adopted country. She also dwells on acculturation and contra-acculturation, which is experienced by the second generation Indian-Americans. Jhumpa Lahiri shows how this second generation is able to get acculturate in the new country, embracing its socio-cultural values, at the same time experience a sense of nostalgia for the Indian culture and sensibilities, experiencing alienation and up rootedness. “...displacement, adhere to their native culture, attempt to integrate themselves into their adopted homeland, and suffer tensions over moral and emotional issues”

Globalisation is leading for world to a new social and cultural pattern. It has largely influenced every new work that is being produced by the diasporic writers. Jhumpa Lahiri intends to foreground this newness of women’s identity caught in the dichotomies of acculturation and dissociation. She reveals the different aspects of diasporic experiences and how these experiences further diverge into preservation and appropriation under the sway of globalization, which is a challenge to cultures, to marginalized communities and their identities. She reveals the main thrust that globalization has contradictory influences on the migrants – preservative for the expatriates and appropriative for the immigrants.

Jhumpa Lahiri’s feminist approach is somewhat different from the other diasporic writers. She represents the different image of Indian woman and her marginalization in cultural context. Her female characters are not subjected to any economic exploitation by the patriarchy. Most of the women characters in her works belong to diasporic communities facing cultural dilemma. She presents the ramifications of patriarchy on the lives of Indian women.

The psychological trauma of a woman is attributed to Indian patriarchal notion of marriage. Their individuality is snatched by neglecting their emotions. she says:

When I first started writing, I was not conscious that my subject was the Indian-American experience. What drew me to my craft was the desire to force the two worlds I occupied to mingle on the page as I was not brave enough, or mature enough, to allow in life.

Lahiri debunks the notion that western culture is universally acceptable and applicable. She shows the incompatibility of western culture. In her novels the immigrant women of the first generation of diaspora are in constant search of their identity and behave as if they are thrown into an incongruous universe. Their lives are not governed by any divine agency. In her works feminine identity is affected more than masculine identity by culture because of women’s strong cultural ties to the land of their ancestors. The second generation creates a different identity which has to be understood on the basis of their psychological assessment. Second generation female immigrants do not deem India as their *home*. Their vision of America is contrary to the first generation. The first generation immigrants become isolated in the alien land and culture. Lahiri presents the divided psyche of women torn between two cultures. She suggests that expatriates have created a third space.

Her works portray male and female characters and the impact the diaspora space has on these subjects and their relationships. It shows how the gender barriers in Lahiri’s fiction are more fluid as it represents both men and women as having different, but still significant, concerns about their roles in the new space, in which cultural diversity is an element that triggers the identity reconfiguration of the subjects. She presents the different aspects of feminine identity. She exemplifies women’s conformist attitude to the patriarchy. She exposes the patriarchal niche of woman as a preserver of indigenous culture. The first generation immigrant women in Jhumpa Lahiri’s works are often subjected to patriarchal marginalization.

Throughout the novels Jhumpa Lahiri tries to depict the predicament of women. She tries to focus on the parental and marital relations. She seeks to expose the traditions by which a woman is trained to play her subservient role in the family. Her novels reveal uneasiness and the adverse condition of the diasporic modern Indian women in the manmade patriarchal traditions.

Lahiri has deep instinctive insight into women's problems and dilemmas which helps her drawing a realistic portrait of a contemporary woman. She explores and interprets the emotional reactions and spiritual responses of women and their predicament with sympathetic understanding. The female protagonists in her novels are in constant search for meaning and value of their life. Jhumpa Lahiri traces a woman's journey from self-sacrifice to self-realization, from self-denial to self-assertion and from self-negation to self-affirmation.

The feminine consciousness is felt in all her novels. She offers us a glimpse into the lives of ostensibly content housewives who are nevertheless suppressed under the weight of male dominance. Her protagonists are stronger than her contemporary writers. They refuse to sacrifice their individuality for the sake of upholding the traditional role. Models laid down by society for women but they attempt to resolve their problems indication of new women and liberated emancipated new women. They, through their rebellion achieve liberation and emancipation.

She not only presents a feminist insight into patriarchal values, but also prescribes a balance between tradition and modernity as a working philosophy for the contemporary woman. She portrays the psyche of the middle-class Indian women who feel oppressed and hemmed in by their patriarchal socialization. To her, traditions are the values of harmony and coexistence that symbolize the Indian way of life, and modernity is the assertion of the independent, individual identity. After having passively played out their socially ordained roles, her protagonists move out of their cloistered shelves to assert their individuality as human beings.

Jhumpa Lahiri feels that a woman must be true to her own self if she wants to realize herself. The straitjacketed role imposed on woman only bogs her down in mire of negation and suppression. She must venture out of the familial framework to give full expression of her individuality and identity. Her novels reveal her artistic vision of femininity. She delineates her women characters in the light of their hopes, fears, aspirations and frustrations. They are aware of their strengths and limitations, but find themselves thwarted by the opposition and pressure from a society conditioned overwhelmingly by the patriarchal mind-set. They are concerned with quest for an authentic selfhood and an understanding of the existential problems of life. She reveals a remarkable insight into a woman's psyche by representing woman in different roles: daughter, wife, mother and an individual who seeks her gender identity. She contributes by depicting the problems and plights, trials and tribulations of the middle class women of Indian society. She does not give her female protagonists a readymade solution for their problems, but develops a faith in hope so that they can change their circumstances from despair to hope through a route of self-searching and self-examination, through valour and resilience.

Lahiri explores the cross-cultural experiences of dislocated women and the possible condition of belonging simultaneously-psychologically and experientially - in the maze of cultural plurality. The issues of identity and cultural clashes have already been vastly explored in her novels. She analyses the issue of cultural encounter specifically from the perspective of women's identity and her approach to this issue is via feminist literary theory but it is natural. When I first started writing, I was not conscious that my subject was the Indian-American experience. What drew me to my craft was the desire to force the two worlds I occupied to mingle on the page as I was not brave enough, or mature enough, to allow in life.

In this connection, *Himadri Lahiri* also points out:

“Expatriate on the other hand, is a sort of static state; it is a refusal to become amalgamated into the new society. An expatriate considers his or her stay in the new country as a temporary matter and looks back to the “home” country for emotional sustenance. Both *Ashoke* and *Ashima* at the moment are therefore not in a position of exuberance”.

The image of woman in Indo-American novel is based on the traditional ancient literature of India, which shows woman as a devoted wife or a devoted mother. Traditionally Indian women have been treated as marginalized figures. They are represented as a spineless, wooden creature, subjected to male domination. The laws of *Manu* dictated the position of women in the family and society. Women were never allowed to be independent and had to spend life under the authority of a man. The sublimation and suppression of natural desires and aspirations creates a deep struggle in women. The society which praises and adores the classic legends or epic like *Kannagi*, *Savitri*, *Sita*, *Draupadi*, and so on, does not give a necessary respect to womanhood. In reality, a woman is always adopted as a daughter, sister, mother, and wife. She is not viewed as an individual or human being.

One is not born; but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine.

The postcolonial writers of Indo-American novels equipped with a new education and sociability have different perspective of the image of woman. In the era of globalization liberal thought was brought all over the world and it was propagated by western education and culture. The woman novelists were responsible for the new image of woman struggling against the oppressive social norms of the western society. In this respect there occurred changes in theme, emphasis and design in the literature of women novelists like Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherji, Kamala Markandaya, Arundhati Roy and Jhumpa Lahiri. They made straight journey into the psyche of a woman who was torn on account of the tensions generated by the discord between an individual and the surroundings. They have started trying to understand Indian women and portray the female characters in their novels. The image of the woman in the fiction is a crystallized form of the two different cultures. They portrayed the image of woman as a custodian of extraordinary moral.

In Lahiri’s writings we have seen that she builds her characters around the immigrant experience and the cultural divide between America and India. At the same time she paints, with sympathy and understanding, indelible characters who experience the pain and suffering of ordinary people. In the title story, ‘Interpreter of Maladies’ (pp.43–69), Mr Kapasi is a character who signifies the deep divide between the culture of American-born Indians and that of Indians living in India. As the Das family’s tourist guide, he is constantly bemused by the fact that these people ‘looked Indian but dressed as foreigners did’ (pp.43–4).

Patience is as essential in both to cultural harmony and within relationships. Lahiri has observed it deeply and through ‘This Blessed House’ she explores both the complications of an arranged marriage and the adjustments that must be made to accommodate a couple’s disparate personalities within any relationship. Sanjeev obviously prefers his bachelor existence ‘when he would walk each evening across the Mass. He and Twinkle are completely mismatched: he prefers an orderly existence, while Twinkle is lazy, slovenly and careless of convention. Further, she was ‘excited and delighted by little things as if the world contained hidden wonders’ (p.142). These qualities make Sanjeev ‘feel stupid’, because he does not understand her zest for life. When Twinkle becomes obsessed with the Christian artefacts left behind by a previous owner in their new house, Sanjeev becomes even more uptight

wondering what the ‘people from the office’ (p.139) will make of these Christian symbols in a Hindu house. He hates the fact that Twinkle is fascinated with them, but in the face of her refusal to abandon them he concedes that he ‘will tolerate’ her ‘little biblical menagerie’ (p.139). This is a further sign that he will accommodate Twinkle’s excesses for the sake of harmony. He continues to clear up after her, but their differences become obvious when he plays Mahler’s Fifth Symphony as a romantic gesture only to have Twinkle advise him that if he wants ‘to impress people’ he should not ‘play this music’ (p.140). The charms of the ‘tender fourth movement’ (p.140) are completely lost on Twinkle.

The couple had met ‘only four months before’ (p.142), and were brought together by the wishes of their parents. This is the situation at the heart of their story, for their obvious differences soon become apparent: Sanjeev is the son of parents who live in Calcutta, while Twinkle is a second-generation American. This basic cultural difference is a further obstacle to their establishment of a successful relationship. Sanjeev had been lonely in America and Twinkle had recently been abandoned by an American man. Brought together by the parents, they believed they had some things in common such as a ‘persistent fondness for Wodehouse novels’ (p.143). With this comment, Lahiri shows her sense of the absurd. To make a marriage work, especially from culturally diverse backgrounds, she shows that a great deal of adjustment and compromise must take place on both sides, and also that tolerance extends beyond a mere shared passion for an author. Sanjeev does not know if he loves Twinkle, although he has chosen her above all the other Indian brides that were suggested to him. He is clearly mesmerized by her, but ‘did not know what love was, only what he thought it was not’ (p.147). In Twinkle, he asks himself, ‘what was there not to love?’

Lahiri shows that in any relationship the two people must be able to learn to tolerate each other’s differences. This is even more so in an arranged marriage, where the couple must develop mutual love and respect.

Many of Lahiri’s stories feature an underlying pattern of human consideration:

1. Shoba and Shukumar eventually develop mutual compassion in ‘A Temporary Matter’.
2. Lilia learns compassion through Mr Pirzada’s enforced separation from his family (‘When Mr Pirzada Came to Dine’).
3. Miranda learns to value herself through her feelings of compassion for the boy Rohin (‘Sexy’).
4. d. Eliot feels compassion for Mrs Sen although, in contrast, his mother does not (‘Mrs Sen’s’).
5. The narrator, although he does not fully understand her, feels a connection with Mrs Croft based on compassion.

CONCLUSION

Jhumpa Lahiri writes about the situation of women and their success and failure in the fast changing socio-cultural milieu of diasporas. Through her protagonist, she highlights that the women are the victims of gender discrimination as a girl child, wife and mother from male as well as from their female counterpart. They are trapped between tradition and modernity. She presents a social and the tradition bound world consists of the modern world. Women have been tutored right from the day they had the glimpses of this world, to follow unquestioningly and relentlessly the ideal of the patriarchal set-up of the family. The woman has been asked to put up all sorts of repressions and suppressions in the name of family honor and for the good name of the children. Women’s sexuality, her experience of pain, pleasure, love or sorrow, desire or respect were matters which were routinely ignored. Jhumpa Lahiri highlights their inferior position and the subsequent degradation in a culturally dominated society.

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